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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 ADDIS ABABA 002112

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [EAID](#) [ET](#)  
SUBJECT: U.S.-ETHIOPIAN RELATIONS MESHED IN UNEASY INTERNAL  
POLITICAL DYNAMICS

REF: A. ADDIS 1154  
[1](#)B. ADDIS 1571

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (S/NF) The growing independence in bilateral policy discussions by hard-liners within the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) party -- including members of the Central Committee and Executive Committee or "Politburo", as well as by powerful outsiders like military Chief of Staff General Samora and National Intelligence Service Chief Getachew Assefa -- combined with the "foils" of Prime Minister Meles in sending negative messages to the U.S. and other nations, have led to reversals as well as shifts in the Ethiopian Government's (GoE) actions. Almost overthrown by central committee dissenters in 2001 over differences on the Eritrea border conflict, the Prime Minister has recovered and enjoys solid control within the Committee. Still, underlying fissures within the Committee remain, exacerbated by growing perception gaps between the Committee and outsiders requiring careful management by the Prime Minister. Both Gen. Samora (a non-member of the Committee) and Getachew are clearly "tougher" hard-liners who are not advocates of the U.S. relationship, but due to their senior and influential positions could potentially pose problems for U.S. relations despite the close ties their respective ministries have with the United States. The hard-liners in general are not opposed to the U.S., but seek tough EPRDF control over government operations, procedures, and structures. In pressing the GoE, whether in advancing our human rights and democratic reform objectives or advocating military and development programs, we must engage in a more concerted, deliberate, and discrete dialogue with the GoE to avert any unforeseen or unintended consequences.

[1](#)2. (S/NF) Meles, release of 71 political detainees last year, handling of the Eritrea border dispute, and debate over

the proposed Charities and Societies Organizations (CSO) law have sparked debate and differences of views within the Central Committee. Yet Meles has the full support of the Committee on issues such as greater control of the press and banking institutions, as well as their blessing to control opposition parties which has led to the effective neutralization of the opposition in the parliament, recent local elections, and in political debates. The 78 percent food inflation rate and 55 percent overall inflation rate, a rising budget deficit, a trade deficit that has ballooned beyond USD 4 billion, the worst drought crisis since 2002, and harsh international criticism of human rights abuse in Somalia and the Ogaden have put the Prime Minister on the defensive and raised serious debate within the Central Committee on how to address and manage these issues. More concerning has been discussion within the Committee of an anticipated deterioration in U.S. relations after the next U.S. presidential election in November as Committee members firmly believe the U.S. will press Ethiopia on human rights and democratic reforms as the centerpiece of its policy towards Ethiopia.

¶3. (S/NF) In engaging with Ethiopian officials, whether on human rights or counterterrorism issues, the Ambassador has stressed the importance of Ethiopia as a cornerstone country with a broad-based and complex, yet mutually supportive, relationship with the U.S. For instance, the Prime Minister and his government have been strong partners with the U.S. on counterterrorism and humanitarian relief efforts and both countries have discussed developmental issues with the U.S. focused more on trying to expand developmental assistance.

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To correct misunderstandings, Prime Minister Meles and other senior Ethiopian officials have suggested closer U.S.-Ethiopian bilateral talks, similar to the ones conducted with China, India and Japan. Such discussions would be useful as the U.S. expands activities in Ethiopia from trade and development support for closer information sharing and cooperation on counterterrorism. Easing Ethiopian anxieties and highlighting our shared interests and programs will best achieve our core objectives and improve our bilateral relationship without undermining the internal stability of the Central Committee or ultimately Meles, political position. End Summary.

#### THE POWERFUL CENTRAL COMMITTEE: COMPROMISING DECISIONS

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¶4. (S/NF) The Central Committee is composed of 225 members from the four regional component parties within the EPRDF coalition. The Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) forms the main and most powerful part of the Central Committee. The smaller and more important decision making Executive Committee or "Politburo" is composed of 36 members. Prime Minister Meles clearly does not rule with unquestioned authority and needs to forge consensus to advance his agenda, which he must compromise to secure approval. Prime Minister Meles, decision to release last summer 71 political detainees arrested after the 2005 elections was criticized by the Central Committee. Meles was persuasive and secured the Committee's support, expending political capital in the process, though earning international support. The Central Committee has also questioned the Prime Minister's posture on the Eritrean border conflict. The Prime Minister was supportive of a post-UNMEE (United Nations Mission to Eritrea and Ethiopia) military observer mission. However, General Samora was highly critical of any foreign observers and quickly nixed the process. The Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Seyoum were persuaded to shift positions and criticized the lack of support from the Security Council in changing their mind to oppose a follow-on UNMEE mission.

¶5. (S/NF) The recently proposed CSO law, which had the support of hard-liners in the Central Committee, was delayed by the Prime Minister and Committee moderates in the wake of

strong international criticism and calls for revision. The delay has angered hard-liners in the Central Committee and divided some of its members, such as the Relief Society of Tigray's (REST) influential Director Teklewoini Assefa, who receives USAID funding and is leading efforts to revise the law. In our July 30 meeting, the Prime Minister argued that the Central Committee's anger with CSOs/NGOs has brought the Central Committee into direct opposition to the aggressive posture of the CSOs/NGOs towards the government over the proposed law. This has so politicized and "poisoned" discussion of the law that Meles has become the arbiter trying to mediate differences among those hard-liners within the Central Committee supportive of restrictions of CSOs/NGOs and other members who favor discussion.

#### TOUGH HARD-LINERS ON THE OUTSIDE

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¶6. (S/NF) General Samora, Chief of Staff of the Ethiopian military, is not a member of the Central Committee but holds a powerful position as head of the military. General Samora has now become one of the most powerful figures in Ethiopian politics. He has done so through his partnership with hard-liners in the Central Committee and his actions of replacing generals -- mostly Western trained and highly skilled non-Tigrayans -- with not necessarily qualified Tigrayans who are loyal to Samora. Samora also succeeded through his superb bureaucratic infighting in getting one pro-U.S. State Minister of Defense dismissed and securing his

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position as more powerful than the Minister of Defense. Getachew Assefa, chief of the National Intelligence and Security Service, is not a skilled bureaucrat nor is he liked by others in his own agency. His position as head of the intelligence service, however, automatically makes him an important player. Getachew is very much like General Samora; they lack the support and respect their predecessors commanded. Samora and Getachew are perhaps "tougher" hard-liners than their hard-line supporters within the Central Committee.

#### UNDERSTANDING THE HARD-LINERS

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¶7. (S/NF) Hard-line Central Committee members form the majority of the Central and Executive Committees, from people like Sebat Nega, Abadi Zemo, and most of the other dominant Tigrayan members of the Committees. Yet these members do not oppose the U.S., per se, but are fundamentally wedded to maintaining tight EPRDF control over the levers of power and influence in Ethiopia. They seek specific benefits from the U.S. to meet their overall objectives. More important, they share a common agenda of greater government control of institutions and procedures which corresponds to their views of "Revolutionary Democracy" (Ref. A) which asserts that government oversight is critical until a middle class is formed, under government auspices.

¶8. (S/NF) Interestingly, both Samora and Getachew support Israel as well as China, and to a certain extent India and Russia, because these countries do not raise human rights in their dialogue with the government and they provide some benefits from military arms sales to low interest loans. Samora's outward views have become more pronounced since he took over his position in 2001. A commander of moderate success, Samora rules the military with a heavy hand and never misses an opportunity to criticize the U.S. for its "wrong" decision of tying military assistance to human rights. He is especially critical of the suspension of the delivery of Humvees after the 2005 national election in which ENDF forces used U.S. procured Humvees to quell violent demonstrations. In dialogue with U.S. officials, Samora and other GoE officials have pointed to this event as evidence of the U.S. as not a completely trustworthy ally.

¶9. (S/NF) Samora and Getachew have not been the most supportive elements for U.S. relations and have undercut some U.S. initiatives and opposed other U.S. programs. General Samora, for instance, has prevented the United States from mitigating the popular lure of extremists by expelling CJTF-HOA civil affairs teams from the Ogaden in 2006 and has ended Ethiopian officers' training in the U.S., though mostly out of fear of his officers not returning, but he has nevertheless focused on training in Russia, China and India as a counter weight to the U.S. Prime Minister Meles has used both to pass unpleasant decisions to the U.S. For instance, in the wake of the AC-130 gunship strikes in Somalia from Ethiopian bases in early-2007 -- which Samora opposed and Meles supported -- the program ended as a result of press leaks from the U.S. Samora was the main conveyor of the bad news which he always delivers with firmness and, we suspect, partial enjoyment. For his part, Getachew has prevented FBI access to individuals of national security interest in Ethiopian custody (Ref. B).

#### ADVOCATING U.S. POLICY MUST BE JUDICIOUS

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¶10. (S/NF) The U.S. is important to Ethiopia and the Central Committee frequently discusses U.S. policy. The Prime Minister has called in the Ambassador for private discussions on U.S. politics and delves into details of American foreign

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policy issues with American visitors. Many Central Committee members do not fully understand American issues or the world around them. A troubling trend has been the growing belief that the EPRDF must brace itself for a tougher and more confrontational relationship with the U.S. after the next presidential election, as the U.S. takes on human rights and democratic reforms as the centerpiece of bilateral policy over the current cooperation on counterterrorism. General Samora and Getachew are very much share this assumption, as do hard-liners from the Central Committee and Executive Committee of the EPRDF, particularly from members from the Tigray region, the power base of the EPRDF. General Samora and hard-line Central Committee members reject the U.S. linking assistance and benefits and associating issues to human rights. The Ambassador has explained that U.S.-Ethiopian relations are complex and while human rights and democratic reforms are a fundamental priority for U.S. policy, the U.S. has a wide range of issues where the U.S. and Ethiopia have a very positive relationship. This includes counterterrorism cooperation, emergency humanitarian relief efforts, development assistance programs, and mutual concern for regional instability and other issues.

#### MOVING FORWARD

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¶11. (S/NF) It is clear that in engaging Ethiopian officials in pursuit of U.S. foreign policy priorities -- particularly on human rights and democratic reforms -- we must carefully consider, and mitigate against any potential unintended consequences of our actions on Ethiopia's highly fluid internal political debate, which easily misinterprets and thinks the worst is yet to come. If our actions do undercut the Prime Minister or yield tougher responses from hard-line members, we could find advocating for our position and achieving results more difficult and relations more antagonistic with the ruling party.

¶12. (S/NF) The Ethiopian government has suggested convening close bilateral discussions with the U.S. similar to those handled with China, India, and Japan to help advance better understanding. Such discussions would help underscore the importance of our bilateral posture advocating for more political debate over issues of concern. Further, bilateral discussions will help U.S. relations with Ethiopia, as well as guide U.S. interlocutors in navigating issues to focus on, issues to avoid, approaches to delicate issues we expect to

disagree on, and common messages to advance as we explain our position and the intricacies of U.S. decision making and also ease their anxieties and misinterpretations. In this context, the Ambassador and Embassy staff have made it a priority to meet with and discuss issues with the Central Committee members, who welcome the intervention. Further, only the U.S. has taken this measure, which will ultimately enhance our relations.

YAMAMOTO